The whole package, Jase. We target him really early in the process. I think you had texted me earlier in the day. I couldn't really talk about it because I wasn't sure it was realistic. He's a big-time rim protector. He's a great one-on-one defender. He's a big-time post defender. Many of you guys that were at the Gonzaga-Portland game I'm sure saw that. I mean he put on a clinic. He can stretch the floor; he's got range. He can score over both shoulders. He's everything you want to look for in a big man in our league today because he can play inside and out, he can defend the rim, he can defend one-on-one, he can defend pick and roll. We think he can play behind Nurk and we think he can play with him too against some bigger lineups. So it was a great opportunity to move up and get the kind of a guy you can't get in the middle of a draft.

Before with Dame and CJ you said there have been moments that resonated with you when you said, "That's my guy." Did you have that moment with Zach?

I did. I was laughing…Bill Branch and I went to the game with the University of Portland and he trailed a break, banged down a three, and then he caught the ball on the left block, got double-teamed, threw a behind-the-back, no-look pass to Tillie, and I said to Bill, "OK, Bill, we can go home, we're done. He's a top-ten pick." And we knew right then. You just realize he's a tough competitor. And one of the things I'm really happy with is we got two of the toughest guys in this draft. They're going to bring a lot of grit, a lot of toughness—they both have a competitive fire—to the team. And I think when you're a young guy joining a team as deep as ours, you're gonna need that.

Latest Video from SB Nation

The Nikola Jokic-Markieff Morris beef fed off family

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Some beeves are petty, some beeves start small and linger, but the Nikola Jokic-Markieff Morris beef was different. It started when one giant shoved a slightly smaller giant really, really hard. It was quite shocking for me, a non-giant, to watch, and based on Markeiff Morris being out for 58 games with whiplash after the shove, it was pretty shocking for him as well. Now, consider the fact that both beef participants are extremely close with their brothers. And also that their brothers are known for shows of aggression and being strong and one used to be a professional MMA fighter. And you've got yourself a beefball with no filler, no biding agent, just beef.

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You obviously saw something early in the scouting process. Had you just seen enough that you didn't need to bring him in?

We couldn't get him in. No, we had no shot of getting him in. There was no way he was going to be there at 15 and I think we got lucky that he was there at 10. You know quite honestly I think some transactions that happened tonight changed the upper part of the…the middle part of the lottery. Sacramento had expectations and what they wanted to accomplish in the draft and it met up with ours. We were lucky to move up and get him.

I do think it's funny, you know [indistinct name] is not here. They're back watching the draft but we sat…we went Mountain West, Pac-12, WCC to go scout…and it wasn't just for the sunshine. But he just kept getting better and better and we kept getting more and more frustrated knowing the more minutes he got, the more the rest of the country was going to catch up. I was talking to his agent about it tonight. He said, "You guys were on this in January. Unfortunately he went on a run in March that got everybody else up to speed on it.

So like I said, we're lucky we had the assets. We have an aggressive owner…really supportive, really believed in what we were trying to do. He gave us the go-ahead to move up.

Moving Up in the Draft

[Indistinguishable question]

I'll tell you, this was a tough one because we knew we'd been talking to Sacramento and a lot was going to have to happen in terms of what they got at 5 for them to be amenable to trading 10. So what was exciting was, they knew right away at 5 that they were open to trading 10, Our problem was, we still had to get through some players. We couldn't do 10 on the come, which is why when you asked me, Jase, I couldn't answer because he was the only guy we were going to move both picks to go get. So it was a little bit agonizing waiting around for those four draft picks making sure that he was still going to be on the board.

On Caleb Swanigan

With Caleb, his body has transformed so much. Did that make it hard to evaluate him?

No. For someone who's barely fitting into his suit right now it was pretty inspiring, actually. He's an incredible kid. You guys got to interview him when he was here. What he's overcome—off the court, on the court—the dedication and passion he has to be the kind of person he is right now is pretty incredible. It's a great story. But he's bought into it now. It

wasn't a means to an end, like, he's turned his life around and—you know, what we really evaluated more than anything with him is, he's just a big time basketball player. I mean, you're talking about a guy who shot 45 percent from three, he was number two in the nation in defensive rebounding, he can bang, he's tough, he scores around the block. He's just one of those guys we all keep talking about we get into these non-position basketball anymore that you just put him on the court and let him play.

Contributing Immediately?

Collins said that he thinks he can be Rookie of the Year. He wouldn't put a limit on himself. Clearly you value him, going to get him. What do you see—short-term—expectations for his role, and how quickly do you think he can get up to be a high-minute guy—a starter type of guy?

Well, you can track Terry (Stotts) down at Summer League, so he'll answer that one for you. You know, what I can tell you is, it's not about Summer League, it's not about Rookie of the Year—this is about the next 12 to 15 years. He's a franchise-level building block to join guys that we already have on this roster. He fits their career arc, he does some things that we really need, but, more than anything—I mean, look, we're trying to build the roster the right way. If we can accelerate this, we would accelerate it, but if we're not going to accelerate it, we need to make the best and the most of the model that we're under right now, which is, we've talked about it consistently, you know, guys on Damian's career arc, but that can grow with the organization, grow with the team, and he fits both because I think he can help right away. We've got a lot of depth, it's going to be a tough rotation to crack, but we're in this for the long haul with him, and that's what the draft is for. The draft isn't for quick fixes and positional need. The draft is for the long term.

Swanigan's Story

The backstory and what people are going to hear about him..how much does that play into the decision to draft him, over and above his talent?

Looking at a transformation like that, it tells a lot about someone's character. I think some of you guys were here back when he played in the Hoops Summit, right before he committed to Purdue, and he's even come a long way from then. It's not just his body; I think people get hyper-focused on that but it's also his game. Look at what he's done with his shooting. That's hours in the gym. His skill level has become so much more advanced. Playing in the Big 10 at that level and competing, to do what he did on the glass and expand his game…it's really inspiring. People put too much emphasis on upside being directly correlated strictly to athleticism. There's upside too in terms of skill level and being able to play the game of basketball. And I think he has a really high ceiling when it comes to that

because what we were most impressed with when we brought him in was his ability to become a really good team defender and the fact that he can pass the ball. We all saw that the last four teams that were left standing this year were all elite passing teams. So anybody that can defend on one side of the ball, rebound, and is also an elite passer and can make shots is someone we're going to maximize.

Needing to Improve

You said the draft isn't for quick fixes but two of your players, Dame and CJ, at least on social media have been pretty vocal about wanting to upgrade the talent. Have they had that conversation with you and what has that looked like?

(laughing) Anyone that knows them, knows they've had that conversation with me. Everybody knows with me that I like to talk with players about players. They know the league they way we do, and who can fit. We've had some deals we've passed on because our guys knew what it would be like in the locker room. I do rely on those guys because they're the future of the franchise and their opinion matters to us. But there's realities about what you can and can't do at times. There's also times that you have to take a longer view. It's my job to take more of a macro view of the organization because we've proven time and again… You know we sat in this room not long ago when we were worried about making a trade at the trade deadline. I was an unpopular guy out on Court One over there telling the guys about the move we made and it resulted—along with us peaking at the right time and making the playoffs, which was everybody's goal—and absent injury I think you would have seen a much more competitive series. I've got to take what they're thinking into consideration. I value it immensely and I've got to try and execute it. But at the end of the day we've got to do what's right, not just short-term but long-term as well. What you don't want to do, Jason, is appease people in the immediate future and then take two steps backwards. And that's what we've got to constantly evaluate.

What was Chicago like for you, getting over there with the management team, you guys getting a chance to sit down, compare notes. Did you guys find some clarity? It was great. Look, clearly there's a different draft priority for the Portland Trail Blazers than there was with my previous team. We've got four picks ahead of where I was picking at 53, so there's a lot of work to do. We've got a lot of question marks that still need to be answered, but it's great to get in the room with Chad (Buchanan) and Mike Born and Billy Branch and Joe (Cronin) and Steve Rosenberry and Sean Kiely and kind of bat some ideas around and kind of see where they had gotten to in their process. I can bring a bit more of a macro vision because I haven't been as focused on those picks. But we're going to jump into it. We've got our first draft workout here Wednesday and Chicago is a great opportunity to do information gathering. **With the workouts that took place in Chicago and those coming**

up at the practice facility help you decide whether this draft is good enough to keep the No. 6 and No. 11 picks, or will it help you decided toward free agency or trades? Well, we're open to anything right now. Clearly we have a lot of roster flexibility. We have two very valuable picks in what is a deep draft. There are a lot of starters in this draft. I don't know how many superstars there are but there are definitely NBA-caliber starters. We're going to exhaust every resource we have. We're going to be on the phone generating deal flow. I've received some calls and made some calls already, kind of looking at where other teams may be vulnerable or have some hot-button issues they may want to address where we could improve our roster and accelerate our success curve. But we're going to do our due diligence first. The draft is the first player acquisition vehicle that we can kind come up with at this point. Then we'll lead into trades and free agency. **It seems like point guard and center are the two positions that need to be addressed. Is there a mechanism in place allows you to look at who's available and what position you want to start looking at first, or is that dictated by what is available when you draft?** Well look, it's cliche but it is best player available. I think that the point that this organization is at right now is an asset acquisition phase 'Tone. We've got to rebuild our assets and at that point, either guys are going to make your team and contribute because they were drafted or you're going to be able to use those assets to generate a deal to bring players in from the outside from other organizations to rebuild the roster. But I think the roster is a work in progress at this point. I think we've got a lot of raw materials and we do have some building blocks with guys like Wes (Matthews) and Nic (Batum) and LaMarcus (Aldridge) and some young players who are yet to develop to their potential yet, and we're going to get in the gym and work with them. But, you know, I think everyone has to look at the draft as a player acquisition vehicle and the more assets you can acquire in this league, the more flexibility you have to build the roster and accelerate the growth to become more successful quicker. We were on one path with the Los Angeles Clippers a year ago, building through the draft, building with youth and when an opportunity came in to go after a franchise-level player, we had the assets to do it. So that's really what the draft is about. It's not about filling needs. **How do you discriminate between what you see from a player in a workout versus what you've seen prior to the workout?** Look, you're sitting next to a great player and he might not have been a great workout guy but he was a hell of a player. And I think what you have to realize is, what you need to do is construct the workout in a way that answers whatever lingering questions you may have based on answers you couldn't get out of live scouting, film work, analytics, attending practices, background research. That's where the workout comes in. You can't look at the workout in a vacuum and decide that is a tool that should supersede all others. It never made sense to me -- and I did this when I worked for the sports agency -- you put on a beauty contest in 45 minutes and somehow either nullifies or clarifies what a guy did after playing 120 games in a college career. So I think you have to keep things in

perspective. It's one more tool we have at our disposal, it's more information gathering but it should not be weighted anymore than what it is, which is a chance to spend a couple hours in a gym with a guy getting to see if they compete. I think that's the buzzword for us up here guys. We know what they can do on the basketball court. We've seen it, we've analyzed it but I want to see who gets in the gym and really competes when they're fighting for a job. **Are you making more phone calls to other teams or are you getting more phone calls from other teams?** Well, you know, I think everybody went to Chicago an you really want to get a feel where other teams are in their process. There are teams looking to go younger and acquire picks, there are teams looking for veterans because they feel like they're closer. You get as much of that information as possible, you come back and meet with your staff and you use that intel to target the goal of your phone call. And like I said, right now, before you can go worry about putting your picks in play, you have to make sure you know exactly what it is you're talking about trading, and the only way to do that is to close the circle of evaluation. And like I said, the rest of that circle will be closed for us later on this week and next week with our redraft workouts. **Have you had a chance to talk with LaMarcus and Nic or Wesley Matthews and kind of get a feel for where they are, what they're up to?** Yeah, I talked to LA. He's coming into town. He'll be in town this week, I'll get a chance to visit with him. He and I spoke for quite a while when I was in Chicago about the the team. I'd like to have him involved, get his thoughts on where we are as an organization, where we need help and players on the roster that have complimented what we're trying to create culturally. Wes is actually over in China with Nike right now. I spoke with his agent. Nic started practices with the French national team today, but I visited for a long time over the weekend with his agent. Nic right now is going to do everything with the national team but contact, and I think he's going to stay away from contact until his contract situation is resolved. Nolan Smith was in the gym; I was just watching him workout this afternoon here at the facility. I think we've got a lot of good, young guys that, you know, they haven't reached their potential yet but I think we need to spend a lot more time in the gym making them better and really seeing what we have here first before we start worrying about what we're going to bring in from the outside. **You probably haven't had much time consider the coaching situation that you discussed at the introductory press conference?** No and I don't think that right on the priority list right now. I think the guys that are available are still going to be available. But I think it's important to remember, when you do a coaching search, it's very important that you know what kind of a team you're searching for the coach for. We just don't know that right now. The roster composition is in a state of flux. Depending on which way we take this team will dictate what kind of coach we're looking for in order to target the search. So different coaches are more valuable at different points in their careers and based on what roster they join, so you can't look at coaches in a vacuum and just say 'Well here's a Hall of Fame caliber coach and that's who we should have'

because if we go in one direction, he may be a great fit. If we go in another direction it may be better to have somebody with a different skill set. So I think the important thing right now is to build the roster, build the culture, see what we have here, set our goals and our parameters and the coaching search, at that point, can be more targeted to what is best going to compliment the point where we are with this organization.

Does the first-round sweep change your thinking about this team and season?

"It doesn't change anything about the season. I think we've got to bifurcate those two things to a certain degree. We lost four games coming into the playoffs and that didn't change anyone's overall outlook on a macro level. I think the playoffs brought a couple issues to bear in terms of teams that can go small. I think (there are) some things we need to address. But playoff series' are always going to illustrate deficiencies. That's what coaches do. They get to play you four different times. They find your weaknesses. And we'll address those in the offseason.

"Regardless of whether we got swept, we lost 4-3, we get into the second round, nothing is going to go unexamined in the organization. It's just a matter of, I think, this one was so extreme, I don't want to overreact to one unfavorable matchup and a team that just played outstanding basketball. You just can't do that. You can't react to, well, now we have to overreact to when we play this style of basketball. We're going to do everything we can to upgrade the roster, like we always do. But we're also not going to lose sight of the success we had throughout the course of the season, and the growth that we had."

You say unfavorable matchup, do you mean Anthony Davis or something else?

"I mean the team."

How stunned were you with the way everything unfolded?

"I think we all are, actually. I think that was the recurring theme in the exit interviews. Nobody has any plane flights scheduled today because nobody expected it to happen. But it did. We had our chance in Game 1. We had our chances in Game 2. Clearly Game 3 was a big setback and then last night, same thing. I was really proud of the way the guys came back on the road in the fourth quarter, made it a one-possession game multiple times. I think stunned; I think disappointed. But I think you also have to keep perspective. We were the three seed. We were a game ahead of New Orleans. We split with them during the season. The one time that we beat them as constructed, when they did play small with (Nikola) Mirotic at four and Anthony at five, I think we won by one and (Damian Lillard) had 40 and he had 20 in the fourth quarter. So it took a gargantuan effort on the road to get that one. We were far more conservative in our expectations of that series than I think the

pundits were that all picked us to win it. Because I think we knew just how good they were and how unique they are with playing Anthony at five."

How do you view this year? Is a success in your eyes?

"I don't know. Is it a success in your guys eyes?"

(Questioner responds: For me personally, I think the way it ended takes a lot away from it.)

"OK. And that's fair. And I think you have to look at it three ways. You have to look at the regular season, where we had great success. We had the third seed, which was the highest this organization's been seeded in two decades. I think the postseason couldn't have been worse. I don't know that you can even have a happy medium. I don't think you can look at it as one consistent theme. I think you really have to look at them separately. I think there's a lot of positives we need to take away from the regular season. And then there's a lot of issues we need to address based on the result of the very abbreviated postseason. But I don't even know that the postseason, honestly, was long enough to blend it in with the other 82 games."

The West is so strong. How hard is it to take that next step?

"Ask the guys that finish four through 15. Right? I think we sat in this room last year and last year we crept into the playoffs. And the question mark was can we ever be a team that hosts a playoff series. Can we get home court advantage, finishing in the top four? How do you go about doing that? We did it with internal growth, excellent coaching. We did it with teamwork. We did it with guys that play well together, that play in a system. We did it with guys that contributed in different areas. Guys were asked throughout the year to step up. And also to step back at times. That's how we did it. And we'll continue to do that. We're building a team.

"I don't have all the answers for you today. Everybody wants to know that there's some magical free agent. There's some incredible trade. There's some draft pick that's going to revolutionize your franchise. And a lot of times you don't know where the help is coming from. Some of it is how you change the lineup, someone that you don't expect to step up. Who would have thought Al-Farouq Aminu was going to spend most of the season shooting 40 percent from three? But he did. Right? The reinsertion of Moe Harkless into the starting lineup. We go 17-3 with Moe as a starter. (Jusuf Nurkic) started out slow. Played well. It takes some time. We lost last night. Nobody expected it. Nobody anticipated it. It happened. And we've now got 10 weeks to kind of address and build a team heading into free agency and the summer and trades. We'll do what we always do. We'll draft, trade, player development, free agency and we'll build the roster."

There are fans who are calling for sweeping changes. Do you think the roster needs tweaking or significant changes?

The same people that wanted sweeping changes last year?

(Questioner responds: I don't know. I don't know them personally. I just hear from them all the time)

"Right. Great. Well, last year was going to take sweeping changes because we got swept by Golden State in the first round and all the alarmists overreacted. Golden State went on to sweep Utah and sweep San Antonio and basically win in five without breaking a sweat against Cleveland. And everybody overreacted.

"So let's be a little bit measured in our reaction to the fact that we ended up against a tough matchup with the best two-way player in the NBA, having a career series. Jrue (Holiday) is healthy and he played phenomenal basketball. It happens.

"But this idea that (we need) sweeping changes. Where were all these people that wanted sweeping changes 10 days ago? Where were they? They were the ones bouncing off the walls in the Moda Center when we got the third seed for the first time since 1999-00. So it's our job to be measured and not overreact. Because when you overreact is when you make mistakes. Nobody thinks this roster is a finished product. Everybody understands it is a work in progress. But it's a work in progress. Relative to people back in December who were complaining that we weren't going to make the playoffs and we were in purgatory because we weren't going to make the playoffs and we weren't going to pick high enough. Right? That was the rallying cry. Then it was, 'Oh my God. They're going to blow the third seed because they're going to lose all these games. They're not even going to get home court advantage.' They overreacted to that. You know what? If the series goes six or seven, if Game 1 goes differently when we had the ball down one, who knows where this series goes? But it didn't.

"But, again, you don't take four games and overreact and diminish what you accomplished over 82 games. The foundation is built during the regular season. There are always extraneous factors that go on in a playoff series. We're the first ones out, so this will be heightened and there will be an over-amount of attention paid to this series until other teams start going out. And then they'll all need sweeping changes."

Does the way you finished the regular season set a new bar for the team and expectations moving forward?

"The bar's always the same. You're trying to be a factor in the playoffs, you're trying to be a team that can advance in the playoffs and see what happens. And you try to put the best

team possible on the floor. And you're trying to do that while growing, not just looking for help externally. But growing from within. I thought this was the most competitive roster in the three years that we kind of entered into a rebuild. I thought Damian showed great leadership throughout the course of the year. I think we probably had more ebbs and flows this season than we did in the first two years. The first two years we just started off really slow and made runs late. And it was kind of almost two distinct seasons. This one was up and down throughout. We had to face a lot of adversity throughout the year. I think, sometimes, people get too high and they also get too low. When all is said and done, weeks down the road, we'll look back and realize we lost in the first round. And whether it 4-3 or 4-0 isn't going to change the fact that in the regular season, a lot of the teams that are playing in the playoffs right now, we either swept, split with, beat. And we'll realize how competitive we were."

So you trust the team that you saw in the regular season more than the team we just saw get swept?

"I would rather trust a team I saw over 82 games than a team I saw over four games."

Can you address the job coach Terry Stotts and his staff did this year?

"What do you expect from a coaching staff? That your players get better. That there was internal growth. Are you competitive every night? Did you improve on areas where you struggled in the past? One of the things people talked about when we sat in this room a year ago, was everyone complained about our defense. It was 26th in the league. It finished ranked eighth (this year). Right? That's growth. Young teams take longer to develop a defensive mindset. It's harder for young teams to defend well. Usually veteran teams are those defensive teams. Offensively, I think we actually took a little bit of a step back this year because there was such a focus on the defensive end. The defensive rebounding carried us during some of the early parts of the season, when the offense struggled. Terry can speak more to that. But there's never a question about coaching or ... whether we were or not prepared going into a game. That was stipulated. Like I said, we ran into a well-coached team with a superstar player that plays both ways, that played a unique style, relative to how they played the first three times we played them during the regular season. They played it really well. And I think the one thing they did a phenomenal job of was, they imposed their style of play on us. And they came out victorious as a result."

In light of the financial restrictions you have this summer, what vehicles do you view as the most likely to help the roster?

"It's always the same. It's draft, trade, player development, free agency. People get caught up in financial restrictions. First of all, half the league is at or will be ... (above) the salary

cap next year. And it's a result of the cap spike from two years ago, increased spending. That's the way it is. But there's a million ways to build a team and I think everybody gets caught up in thinking there's some magical solution because you have cap room or you have an exception. That's not necessarily true. If you look at how many teams got better this year because of trade or draft-related moves versus teams that got a free agent to come into their cap room, the teams that did the former improved greater than the teams that just signed the free agent. That's how it works. So, like I said, guys are going to continue to get better. There's still a lot of upside on the roster. We have our first-round draft pick, we'll be active at the draft as usual. We've been active and opportunistic in trades. We've found value players. We'll continue to do that.

One of the things I'm disappointed in from a narrative standpoint from this whole year that nobody picked up on was this: How important the quality of your players and building a team is to winning and losing basketball games. Everybody wants to look at a vacuum at specific players. This player, this player, this player. His numbers, his numbers, his numbers. And what nobody looked at was the chemistry, the camaraderie, the teamwork, the way this group stayed together. We'd lose three or four in a row, they never fractured. It frustrated guys in the media because you would ask Dame or you would ask CJ (McCollum), they'd say, 'We're fine. We're fine.' And nobody wanted to believe that we were fine. Yet somehow, we ended up with 49 wins and we were the third seed in the Western Conference. We were fine. They believed it. They're the ones that have to believe and they believe in each other and they elevate each other. It's one of the things we talked about with Dame's leadership. Dame's great ability from a leadership standpoint is to get guys to elevate their play to a level they can play at. By increasing everybody's level of play by five, 10, 15 percent, because of the empowerment he gives them, in aggregate adds another player, another impact player. I think that's the hardest thing at times; this isn't NBA2K. The teams with, across the board, the highest profile names on their teams aren't necessarily the best teams. And it comes down to coaching and culture and organization and team-building and character. And that's what you saw during the ebbs and flows of our year. It never fractured in here ever. Not once. You never heard one story about it fracturing, relationships player-to-player, player-to-coach, the organization, organization-to-coach. Never. Not once. You never heard that. And that's what kept everybody together. And that bond is why, even losing in four, will give us something to build on instead of something to regret."

Have you spoken with owner Paul Allen since the season ended? And what was his message?

"Yeah, I was with Paul last night. His message was we had a great regular season, he was proud of the way we competed. He was proud of the fact that even last night, when we got down 15, we never stopped fighting. But, based on the regular season, we had larger aspirations than a first-round playoff exit. And we need to find a way to get better."

How will you approach Nurkic's free agency?

"We can't. You know we can't discuss free agency. He's a restricted free agent. We'll handle that when free agency starts. He's not the only restricted free agent on the roster. Pat (Connaughton) is restricted, Shabazz (Napier) is restricted. Ed (Davis) is unrestricted. So we've got some guys we have to deal with internally. And we'll handle that. Right now, we're trying to get through our exit interviews with our guys and check in on them, make sure they have what they need heading into the offseason and set the plan for the young guys as far as what we expect from them in the offseason, prep them for summer league. And in a couple weeks, we'll get to Chicago and start working on the draft."

Do you share Portland's love for Ed Davis?

"Yeah. Everybody does. I signed him. Another guy happy that he left L.A. and came to Portland, along with me. So there you go."

Do you remain steadfast that you're not going to break up the Lillard and McCollum core?

"Yeah. Yeah. When 27 other teams aren't jealous of our backcourt, then I'll start worrying about (it). The other thing I said to somebody last night, they were asking, 'Can you win with two 6-foot-3 guards?' We just got swept by a team that started three guards under 6-4. So I don't know what our two guys have to do with it."

You seem so positive about a team that was just swept out of the playoffs. What gives you so much optimism about this roster and this nucleus?

"The growth. I think we had an eight-game improvement over last year. I think if you ask anybody, we gave away some games this year. I don't even know that the record is 100 percent reflective of what it was capable of. We did have some ebbs and flows and lost some games that, I think, if you look back on the schedule, you would have checked off as wins. And then we also won some games I don't think anybody expected us to win. I think when you look at how competitive we are with the teams that were in our conference, that were in our division, that are playing at a really high level right now and how we performed against them, knowing internally the amount of work that they put in. And I think more than anything, the biggest question mark we've all had that goes beyond whether or not we have

two guards on our backcourt under 6-3, would Nurk become a player or anything else; the biggest question was always: 'Can this group, as constructed, have an impact defensively?'

"And I think from a coaching standpoint, from a player-commitment standpoint, to get buy-in from guys that, quite honestly, other than Farouq and maybe Moe (Harkless), are really guys that probably came into the league as offensive players. To get that kind of buy-in from an individual and team concept, that's why we did play so well on the road until this series, because the defense traveled. I think the coaches believed. But I don't know that we believed we could, with this group, have a top-10 defense for the entire NBA season. And we did. And I think there were even guys looking at it, analytics-based, back in November/December, wondering if it was sustainable or if it was a byproduct of a soft beginning of the schedule. And it was. When you can be in the top 10 all year over an 82-game schedule with a predominantly offensive-oriented roster, it's a testament to the job the coaches did. And it's also kudos to the players that they were able to adopt a totally different mindset as two-ways guys as opposed to just trying to outscore people on the other end of the floor."

Moe Harkless mentioned to us how important you guys said he was to the team. Is that one thing you learned?

"I give credit to Zach Williams, who runs our analytics. Because he's probably the biggest Moe backer. Whenever things were down, all the numbers kept showing how important Moe was to us. Last year, when we finished strong throughout the year, we were at our best with Moe and Farouq at three and four. It got even better when Nurk came in. I think we saw that this year. Moe admittedly got off to a slow start. So did Nurk. We were sluggish early. We had a soft schedule that we didn't really take advantage of and guys weren't playing at their level. And Terry reinserted Moe into the starting lineup. Evan was dinged up a little bit with his calf strain, so he was on limited minutes. And we went on a 17-3 run.

"So Moe is a high-impact guy for us. He gives us a lot of defensive versatility. He can score in transition. He makes a lot of things at three/four switchable with Farouq. He can guard one-through-four. And he's probably the best athlete on the team. He is. He's a linchpin to a lot of things we do and I think a lot of the guys who are in the know, when Moe went down late in the year, there were guys that knew this was going to be a huge loss for us. That's not using injury as an excuse. That's just answering your question about how important Moe playing at the level he's capable of. You forget, we lost one of our better defenders, (but) Moe was also second in the NBA in three-point field goal percentage after the trade deadline behind Doug McDermott. He was shooting 54.5 percent. He went from shooting 31 to 41.5 on the season. I think Moe ended up leading our team in three-point shooting for the regular season. That's a big deal. Everybody's looking for 3-and-D guys. Well there you

go. And he's still only 24 years-old. I think we'll see a more consistent Moe next year, realizing he needs to come in Day 1 and play at the level he's capable of."

Why trade Mason Plumlee and why right now?

Olshey: Well, you know, look Mason's impending free agency was certainly a factor. We love Mason. We're going to miss him around here. We wouldn't have been in the second round of the playoffs last year without him. But there's certain realities to managing our (salary) cap. We felt like we needed to get younger at the center position. We wanted more of a low post player, someone that could defend size, strength. We found that with Jusuf. And, look, this is the hard part of the business is you have guys that you get attached ... but you've got to make business decisions. We felt like in the long run this will pay longer dividends, having a young guy on a rookie scale (contract). We manage our cap with it. He gives us a different look defensively. He's a big time rebounder. And I think he'll make the game easier for guys like Dame (Lillard) and CJ (McCollum) because we've got more presence in the paint now defensively.

The Feb. 23 trade deadline is fast approaching and, naturally, fans are curious if there will be more movies. Can you speak to that?

Olshey: Well, we're active. You know I think this roster was always going to be a work in progress. We have the benefit of having Paul Allen as an owner. He let us retain all of our players. It wasn't realistic to think we could manage that cap going forward. But what it did do is it put us in a position to keep as much as possible, put us in a position to compete, but knowing at some point we're going to have to make some moves. I think Mason is an example of that. It's not a player we wanted to lose. But the reality is from a cap standpoint we needed to go average down the salary but maintain our ability to compete, you know, now and in the future with not losing someone at that position. I can't speak to any specifics, but what I can tell you is the league is very active right now. What we're most excited with is having three picks in this draft. We've done a very nice job in the draft so far whether it's using draft picks to acquire players like we did with Robin Lopez or Mason Plumlee or drafting guys like Dame and CJ and AC (Allen Crabbe). We're excited about the prospect of that. It's a big time draft. It's got incredible depth. We'll be excited about it in June but we now also have those tools for the next 10 days to put it in play if a player that will impact our win total comes available.

How would you like to see the rest of this season play out?

Olshey: I want to see us just to continue to compete. It's ironic. We've been in a lot of games. Terry and the players have done a great job of making comebacks, keeping us competitive and a lot of them some 50-50 balls just haven't gone our way. Some other

teams have made big time shots and ours haven't gone down. We're probably a six point swing overall from being a six or a seven seed versus where we are today. So we're right there. Right on the cusp. We miss ET (Evan Turner) obviously. It will take a while for Jusuf to get acclimated to our system, but we're always going to compete. Being led by guys like Dame and CJ we have a chance to win every night. And that's what we're going to do. We're going to keep rolling the ball out there and giving ourselves the best chance to win. We're going to compete for that last playoff spot, but we're also going to take a long term view to building the roster.

What can we expect to see from [Zach Collins] in season 2?

Zach Collins was the No. 1 defender at summer league. ...He gave up 0.227 points per possession when he was on the floor. It's an insane number.

I think a lot of that has to do with how much stronger he is. He can hold his ground in the post, he absorbs contact at the rim with verticality and he hasn't lost any of his quickness, which is the key.

We've gone through this before where guys have tried to change their bodies, whether they got bigger or whether they got stronger or they lost weight, and it's affected their mobility, their strength and their basketball functionality.

Zach actually got better with it.

From a balance standpoint, he got moved around a little bit in the low post last year. His center of gravity is going to be better. His core is better. Physically, guys look at him as a bigger player now because of the weight and the muscle that he's put on.

Going into this offseason, you had said you wanted to look for NBA veteran leaders to really help you come playoff time. We actually ended up getting younger. Why the change of plans?

The market dictates that.

We identified five wings that all had playoff experience or veteran wings we thought we could get for the taxpayer midlevel. They all got either significantly more, or they're in markets where they'll become early bird players or they'll have no state income tax, which adds to the value of the contract.

Editor's note: Olshey didn't reveal which five players the Blazers pursued. But we can speculate. They would need to be wings who were signed for more than the taxpayer midlevel exception before the Blazers moved on and agreed to a two-year, $5.6 million contract with Seth Curry, which used up about half of their taxpayer exception.

We already know the Blazers targeted Mario Hezonja, who signed with the Knicks for a one-year, $6.5 million contract instead. Other than Hezonja, other players that fit the criteria above include Rudy Gay (1 year, $10 million with San Antonio), Joe Harris (2 years, $16 million with Brooklyn), Doug McDermott (3 years, $22 million with Indiana), Trevor Ariza (1 year, $15 million with Phoenix), and Marco Belinelli (2 years, $12 million with San Antonio).

What we realized this year was we were going to go through our list, we attacked each guy, we recruited him as hard as possible. When they were able to get compensated at a much higher level than the $5.3 [million] tax midlevel, then we went with talent.

RELATED: Blazers GM Olshey: We were too 'conservative' in building roster

Instead of continually going down the list and trying to make signings that checked some boxes in July, we went with the guys that were younger, that we thought had more talent and higher ceilings that were better for the future. At the end of the day, that ends up paying off.

We've seen it with our own roster, with guys like CJ [McCollum]. Instead of bringing veterans ahead of him, which all that did was sublimate his development — everybody in the gym knew how good he was — but because we were trying to appease the marketplace and try to bring in a guy who had a higher level of trust with the coaching staff, we kept a guy subordinate to him for an extra year, where we would have been far better off playing CJ sooner rather than later. I think it's a lesson we learned.

One of the things we've realized is the guys who have excelled here are the second-draft model players, guys like Moe Harkless, Shabazz [Napier], guys like Jusuf Nurkic. They've really excelled when there's been no impediment to their development, that when the minutes were there to be earned and they earned them, they were able to take over those minutes, as opposed to knowing no matter how well they played, they were going to hit a ceiling because there were veteran incumbents ahead of them.

That said, we were hoping to get those veteran guys, but they had to be good enough to justify impeding the development of our younger players. We tried to walk a very thin line, we didn't keep going down the list and get a lesser-known name who couldn't really help us.

What we did after we got to a certain point, we realized the taxpayer midlevel had been devalued, based on what wings were getting in the marketplace. We needed a combo guard. [Blazers head coach] Terry [Stotts] always likes having a shooting combo that can play on and off the ball with [Damian Lillard] and CJ. We did that with Seth [Curry].

Nic Stauskas is absolutely the prototype of the guys we've had great success with. Really talented, highly drafted. He's been in some difficult situations in the league, needs to find a

home. Bringing him in, another guy who shot 40 percent from 3 last season, we needed to add shooting. He handles and makes plays. He'll fit in as well.

We'll stay opportunistic for the rest of the offseason, looking to see that now that basically every team other than Sacramento, who has about $11 million in room, are out of cap room, are teams going to have to start doing business with one another again to upgrade their rosters?

You just spoke on them a little bit, but I want to talk a little bit more about Seth and Nic. When you looked at them, what really stood out to you? They kind of were under the radar, if you will. Why do they fit this team so well?

I think Nik was probably a little under the radar in terms of the timing. We knew we were going to have to fill the roster with a couple of minimum players because we had the tax midlevel [and] we had a couple of minimums. If you sign Nik on July 5, it doesn't have the same resonance in terms of the fan base or the market, but the chronological order doesn't matter.

VIDEO: **Blazers introduce Curry, Stauskas**

We felt he was one of the better minimum wings on the market. We feel like he has the right skill set that can be maximized in Terry's system. He can dribble, he can pass, he shot the well from 3 last season, he's a good athlete, needs to find a home. So we went out earlier to get him.

We played the taxpayer midlevel market all the way through until about July 5. We just couldn't outbid teams. It was a very defined negotiation. We only had $5.3 [million]. It was a three-year deal worth about $16.5 million, and we got outbid. At that kind of a price point, guys are going to take the extra million, million-five, over coming to a place that they'd have to take a reduction and you can't even offer a starting role.

With Seth, he had a great year two years ago, he's 100 percent healthy, he's a big-time shooter, he knows how to play. The key with that position, as we've seen with guys in the past whether it's Mo Williams, Steve Blake, Shabazz last year, they have to be able to play with and behind Dame and CJ equally. And we think Seth can do that.

Looking back to earlier in this summer, Ed Davis is no longer on the team. If you look at the fan base, as you know very well, they really took a liking to Ed, especially last year when he was healthy. So just explain more to the fans why it made sense, because I know it was a difficult decision, especially with the chemistry he had with the team and with how gritty a player he was.

He was. Ed was great. It's probably why I was Ed's call at 8:30 the night of free agency asking [if he] should he take the deal that was being offered or shouldn't he, knowing where his market was. I advised him to take it because I really felt like players in that category were going to end up taking minimums if they waited too long.

RELATED: **Blazers GM Olshey says he advised Ed Davis to sign with Brooklyn**

Going back to what we were talking about, like with CJ, we feel like we have internal solutions that will eventually be upgrades, and that was the deal. Ed is a veteran and you can't bring Ed back and ask him to take on a reduced role. But if Ed comes back and plays the same role, it sublimates guys on the roster that we think have a higher ceiling and that eventually can bring more to the table.

It's not about development over winning. We feel like, when you watch what Zach Collins did in summer league, when you watch some of the issues we faced in the playoffs, in terms of spacing, in terms of floor balance, because of the style of play that Ed plays, it puts us in a position where you watch Dame get blitzed in pick and rolls when he shares the floor with guys. We needed to add more shooting, more floor spacing, more playmaking out of that position.

We talked about it. During the regular season, it was phenomenal. We ran into a really tough matchup in the playoffs. They blitzed every pick and roll. Essentially, it took Nurk out of a lot of the series as well. We really felt like we needed to move on and get guys that can play a style where they can attack switches better in the low post, they can stretch the floor and shoot the ball when Dame is blitzed, if guys aren't going to rotate to the rolling or popping or fading big.

It's not a position anymore where guys are carrying three or four centers. ... You need one center, your starting center, and then you're piece-mealing it behind that guy. We needed to give an opportunity to the guys that were here. We feel like they step into that role better and that they bring something to the table that we were missing and that got exposed during that playoff series.

How pleased are you with the terms you came to with Jusuf Nurkic and what can we expect to see from him in his fifth season?

We are pleased. I think it was a very generous deal, given the situation. Paul [Allen] was great about it for Nurk. He wanted to make sure Nurk walked away happy while still doing what was best for the organization.

He was restricted, he had the opportunity to go out and get an offer sheet. I think he wanted to be here. We wanted him here.

RELATED: Nurkic, Blazers agree to four-year, $48 million deal

It's a tough time right now in the league for bigs. That's the reality. We're going to more positionless basketball. We're not all trying to be Golden State, but we're not also not carrying a heavy percentage of our cap at the center position.

Timing is everything. Two years ago, you're going to look at comps in the market and wonder why those guys are making more. But if you look at the rest of this summer, Nurk had one of the more lucrative deals in the marketplace while still being very team favorable, in terms of managing our cap and tax position, while knowing long-term, we have him for the next four years.

That gives us a really good runway. We're keeping the core together, knowing Dame and CJ have at least three years left on their contracts. We give that group the best chance to win without impeding our ability long-term, in terms of being into a number that's completely non-liquid.

On the Allen Crabbe trade exception

Honestly, we were caught off guard. We thought for sure the trade exception would have huge value in the league. Teams are just not in the business of giving up quality players like they were, because everybody understands they're going to have to pay the freight this summer for what everybody did back in 2016. There just weren't as many pieces in the marketplace to do the absorption deals we've seen in the past.

RELATED: Olshey on using trade exception: 'The calculus has changed'

I think the impact of Golden State is teams weren't as willing to go give up players to create cap room to chase certain free agents, knowing maybe it doesn't get you over the hump, especially in the Western Conference.